

Chapter 3

Sikh Studies: engagements with the Gurū Granth Sāhib

Introduction: interpretation of Sikh ‘theology’

Despite the Herculean effort of the Singh Sabha reforms to create a distinctive Sikh tradition, McLeod notes in respect of their remarkable literary output that, ‘theology, however, was largely ignored’ (1988: 32). By ‘theology’ he means, ‘a systematic expression of beliefs flowing from that fundamental doctrine [about God] and integrally expressed’ (1988: 32. fn.2). After justifying, in one short paragraph, why an Indian tradition of the Panjab is best read in terms of a Western construct of theology – citing the evolution of the tradition and its doctrine – McLeod spends the rest of the paper arguing that this theology must not be written by an ‘outsider’ to the tradition and certainly not by using alien terms (1988: 33).

McLeod believes such a task involves (only) three general questions concerning the materials to be focused on: the relation of each doctrine to others, their incorporation ‘within the system as a whole’, and ‘the appropriate method of conducting the analysis’ (1988: 34). Thus the beginning of a project was being outlined. As a newcomer to the field of Sikh Studies, I aimed to answer McLeod’s call. However along the way the project fell apart and mutated into something with a force of its own, inspiring a whole new set of questions hitherto neglected in Sikh Studies. It is not insignificant that at the ‘New Departures in Sikh Studies International Conference’ held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in May 1998 McLeod, a respondent to my paper on Sikh hermeneutics, felt unable to give any response to its subject matter and its salient question: why a ‘Sikh theology’ in the first place? Such a proclivity for theology as I argued in the paper, has to be seen as part of a larger conceptual framework or modernist paradigm that postulates a ‘monotheistic Sikhism’ (Bhogal: 2001).

A simple answer to McLeod’s question of why Sikhs have not yet managed ‘to write a theology’, would be to underscore the alienness and hence the inappropriateness of the question. What indeed would Sikhs gain from systematising their thought in such a way? A theology has not been written because it was, and perhaps still is, simply irrelevant to Sikh *praxis*. Theology, with its focus on ‘doctrine and belief’ was and will remain inappropriate to Sikh daily life, and this thesis goes to considerable length to detail exactly why. The issue concerns the subordination of *praxis* to *theoria*, *phronesis* to *technē* by Western academics and Singh Sabha scholars. Although McLeod argues that Singh Sabha scholars laid the groundwork for such a theology, it does not follow that contemporary scholars should pick up from where

they left off, especially after detecting their bias for *theoria* in the cataloguing of Sikh 'belief'.

The question of systematising *guramati*, however will not disappear, but gains more weight after the colonial encounter with the British, and the Sikh mimetic internalisation of British-Christian culture, its terms, ideas and institutions (Singh, Arvind-pal: 1995, 1999). For any formulation of Sikh teaching this conflation demands a response beyond the duality of 'East' and 'West', 'orthodoxy' and 'orthopraxy'. Moreover, given migration and diaspora communities, the terms 'British' and 'Sikh', 'academic-reason' and 'community-faith' lose their oppositions. McLeod's question therefore cannot be ignored totally, but must be re-understood.

McLeod devotes the rest of his paper to discussing trivial examples of the 'paramount need for working from the tradition's own concepts and terminology' (1988: 34); e.g., *Akāl-Purakh* instead of 'God'; Panth for 'church', *granthis* for 'high priests'. However, merely using Sikh terms does nothing to challenge the interpretive frame into which those terms are being lodged (in this case a Christian-centred theology), nor does it face the problem or effects of the translation process itself. Therefore despite acknowledging that a 'careful analysis of such terminology' is only a preliminary step, the Other is still kept under the microscope for an imperial and modernist 'we' which believes it can still 'effectively penetrate the inner meaning of a culture or a tradition' (McLeod: 1988: 43).

Similarly, Cole (following W.C. Smith and general Religious Studies phenomenology) adopts the native American saying for reserving judgment until one has walked a mile in someone's moccasins, to argue that Westerners should likewise 'take off their shoes, that is their cultural baggage, and listen' (1999: viii). Both views expressed by McLeod and Cole, are academically naive, modernist and orientalist in approach, displaying, in Gadamer's phrase, a 'prejudice against prejudice'. Gadamer would argue, if it is at all possible, that one can only put on the Other's shoes on top of one's own; for it is not so easy to bracket prejudices (or conduct the Husserlian *epoché*), no matter how carefully one listens and how much one uses the indigenous terms of a tradition: taking off one's shoes is highly problematic if not misguided. The inevitability of cross-cultural interaction demands a different 'wearing' that demands opening and expansion. This is natural and indeed healthy; both cultures have to 'break and expand' to a certain degree if any walking (communication, dialogue) is to occur. However it is the breaking that is completely overlooked by Cole and McLeod, and by phenomenology as understood and appropriated by Religious Studies.¹ Both the former ignore the fact of translation and its materiality, assuming one can step in and

¹ See Flood 1999 where there is a conscious shift away from the philosophy of consciousness in phenomenology to the philosophy of the sign in hermeneutics (as in Ricoeur).

out of socio-linguistic frames as one does with different pairs of shoes – at no cost to one’s own shoes. It is naive to assume that languages and cultures are monolithic and static and able to absorb and represent other socio-political views without undergoing complex transformations. The choice is not between whether one can represent another’s view in an alien language or not, but what care is taken during the process of translation, interpretation and recontextualisation to hear the ‘echo of the Other’ in the new forms of an evolving linguistic hybridity.

The colonial experience has led Sikhs themselves to interpret the GGS according to an Euro-American, largely Christian agenda. The vast majority of Sikh literature on the exposition of *guramati* (academic and otherwise) has largely focused on the nature and conception of ‘God’, expressed normatively and theologically through the *mūla-mantra*.² Both of these biases, on theology and a minute fragment of Sikh thought in the *mantra*, has allowed a rather ‘free’, if not distorted, interpretation of the thinking of the Gurūs. Talib writes, ‘the conception of the Supreme Reality, i.e. God is fixed in the *Mul Mantra* (The Basic creed) of the Sikh faith’ (1990: 24). Whole books (e.g. Singh, Pritam 1985) have been dedicated to explicating the ‘*Sikh Concept of the Divine*’ via an analysis of, at worst the nine terms of the *mantra*, and at best of the *Japu* (which opens with the *mantra*). These interpretations are therefore highly reductive, disregarding the vast body of songs in the GGS.

Such reductive approaches reflect clear ideological biases, for example: ‘Akal is as unmistakably the Sikh name for God, as *Allah* in the Muslim tradition’ (Talib 1990: 25). Gurū Nānak uses this term four times, and in the whole GGS it occurs only approximately thirty-five times. One need only compare the counts in Gurū Nānak’s vocabulary alone for *hari*⁶³⁰ and *rāma*²⁸⁵, against the Perso-Arabic terms like *sāhibu*¹³⁵ and *khasamu*⁷⁸, to reveal an obvious prejudice in some contemporary interpreters against Hindu and Muslim names for those they claim to be distinctively ‘Sikh’. Nearly all other works concerning ‘Sikh philosophy’ or ‘theology’ follow the Singh Sabha trope of stating the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Sikh tradition³, and most therefore ignore the complex web of inter-traditional terms and ideas present within the GGS, as well as the nondual relations between divinity and humanity given their theological point of departure. This theologisation of the thought of the Gurūs has led therefore to a standardisation of an alien dualistic hermeneutics modelled on Christianity and

² Literally translated: ‘1 Sound Being (*iku-oamkāru*), True Name (*sati-nāmu*), Creator-Man (*karatā-purakhu*), without Fear (*nirabhau*), without Hatred (*niravairu*), Timeless-Form (*Akāla-mūratī*), Unborn (*ajūnī*), Self-Existent (*sainbhanī*), [lived] through the Gurū’s Grace (*gura-prasādi*)’. (GGS: 1, JP).

³ ‘Sikhism differs from other religions very significantly, and has been misunderstood in proportion to its distinctiveness. Guru Nanak emphasized the clean break with the Hindu tradition...’ Singh, Gurtej 1996: 10. This is a sensitive point that reveals a long-standing polemic between indigenous Sikh scholars and Western academics. See, for example, the apologetic works of Singh, Daljeet 1994 and Dhillon 1992.

Islam (despite Singh Sabha apologetics). Yet neither of these Semitic religions share the core Indian ideas of *karma* (action), *samsāra* (cycles of compulsive birth and re-birth), and *māyā* (illusory world) – which in relation to *dharma* (duty, law, righteousness, truth) and Gurū Nānak's *hukamu* (Law) and *nadari* (Grace), directly counter the Semitic duality between 'God' and 'man'.

This thesis, in trying to understand Gurū Nānak's teachings, must therefore address issues concerning contextualisation and *praxis* as well as translation and interpretation. However before this is approached, it is important to acknowledge that interpretation is not questioned (by Sontag for example), but flatly rejected by some Sikh scholars.

Against hermeneutics: 'genuine scholars don't interpret'

It is not only Western academics who reorganise Gurū Nānak's teaching to conform to an imposed pattern – the result of a basic naiveté concerning the issues raised by cross-cultural translation. Indigenous Sikh scholars (equally ignorant that such interpretive issues occur even within the same socio-linguistic culture), often in vehement opposition to Western academic representations, also reflect clear ideological assumptions that seem quite contrary to Gurū Nānak's own thought. At a conference held in memory of Daljeet Singh – considered by some as the 'ideological lighthouse for the Sikh people' (Singh, Gurtej 1996: 10) – Gurtej Singh, despite acknowledging that for too long 'we have neglected Guru Granth Sahib... we do nothing to interpret it to the world' (1996: 11–12), goes on to define just what he means by interpretation via the figure of Sahib Singh (1994). The latter Gurtej claims 'unveiled the mysteries of *gurbani* grammar', 'corrected our defective vision', and 'was able to conclusively show that it [*gurbani*] can yield no more than one meaning'. For Gurtej, Sahib Singh is a 'true Sikh', who 'once and for all put an end to the concept of the so called *gurpranālis* or different systems of interpretation of *bani*' (1996: 13).

It is, however, naive to assume that interpretation can be limited by grammar; for to believe that grammar can yield 'no more than one meaning' is itself an interpretation. Grammar does focus translation, though each translation still needs to be interpreted and recontextualised, and these are not separate processes. The link between grammar and interpretation is so tenuous that to claim otherwise can only disclose a political and/or instrumental motive. The diversity of interpretive traditions (*pranālis*) reveals a basic, though often missed, point.⁴ The Gurūs' teachings do not exist in a vacuum, free of time, language and culture. Rather their thought is repeatedly recontextualised and situated into changing interpretive frames, even during the

⁴ For the interpretive traditions see Singh, Taran 1988.

hallowed Sikh Gurū-period.⁵ To claim that there can only be one true interpretive frame begs the question upon what grounds can such a frame justify itself? For to do so it would have to argue against being situated at all and even deny interpretation itself. Gurtej Singh's eulogy of Sahib Singh goes on to make precisely these claims (1996:13-14).

Sahib Singh has to be 'extraordinary' and 'blessed' in that he is then conveniently placed beyond human questioning, safeguarding his one and only true interpretation of the GGS. Recalling the discussion on Nida one has simply to trust Sahib Singh's views as being divinely sanctioned (something that even Sahib Singh himself does not claim). That Sahib Singh 'ended the vagueness' is supposed to reassure, but the fact that Gurū Nānak favours ambiguity over a dualistic clarity, makes claims about 'only one interpretation' of his thought suspect.

'Textual study', Gurtej Singh goes on to plead, 'does not make sense' since 'no text which predates it [GGS] is available' (1996: 14). He concludes without studying the actual manuscripts in question and with scarcely any supporting evidence that because the 'seal of finality' has been placed on the GGS by the Sikh Gurūs, it is 'folly for a mere mortal to attempt reopening it' on the basis of the Goindval Pothīs (1996: 14). Gurinder Singh Mann, who has carefully studied the texts, although he accepts that 'the canon is closed' (1996: 46-7), however notes the critical role the Goindval Pothīs have played in the historical formation of the GGS (1996: 1, 18, 46-8).

Nevertheless, Gurtej Singh will not be persuaded, and goes on to confuse the 'seal of finality' of the text itself with the belief that it also extends to its interpretation. If one follows the fallacy that a fixed text leads to a fixed interpretation, then the task of its communication simply becomes one of reduplication conducted not necessarily by 'genuine scholars' but more likely by those willing to toe a party line, because 'no one will be allowed to even raise the questionable question of textual analysis' (Singh, Gurtej 1996: 15). Such statements were made with the full knowledge that Western scholars (James Massey and Noel King) were also present in the gathering.

Despite Gurtej Singh's appeals to academic canons of objectivity, there is in reality a severe curb on the (academic) freedom to question critically. 'Finality', 'closure' and the tone of a military operation is evoked, and which is conducted by 'genuine scholars' who must fight to 'preserve, protect and propagate' the GGS (1996: 15). Yet, within the space of a page the GGS, which is itself beyond interpretation, because it has been interpreted by a genuine Sikh for all time, becomes the authentic and only standard 'to help interpret' all other scriptures which are in some way lacking (1996: 15). Apart from being offensive, such a view is incoherent and misguided. It does not follow that because the GGS is the 'only complete record' of 'God's revelation'

⁵ See Hans 1988 for an initial exploration.

that it can help interpret other traditions. He pretends to argue on the grounds of shared scholarly ideals, when it is quite transparent that a zealous faith (in the universalism of its message) is the support. That is to say, whilst on the one hand Gurtej Singh rejects interpretation, on the other he accepts it if done by a 'genuine' or 'blessed' Sikh in reinterpretation of other 'faiths'. The only acceptable scholars for him then are devout believers, revealing a sharp polarisation between 'sacred faith' and 'secular reason': 'most of our premier institutions are staffed with half-educated non-believers, who could never be accused of spiritual leanings' (1996: 25). It is hardly surprising then that the only valid scholarly activity acceptable within such a discourse of replication (of the same accepted ideology) is one which reproduces Sikh-ism as unique, and as the foremost monotheism.

This typical polemic is based on an inferiority complex and a persecuted victim consciousness, that wrongly interprets all work on the GGS as attacks upon its 'holiness' by an 'enemy', even when such a notion of textual sanctity was itself criticised by the Sikh Gurūs themselves. Gurtej Singh's views are bound by a rudimentary dualistic discourse of 'us and them', where the simplistic and wholly self-serving labels of 'blessed', 'righteous', 'genuine' etc., are contrasted with an evil conspiring enemy that must ultimately be destroyed. This enemy is perceived to be the same as the past 'enemies of the Gurus' (Muslims), the enemies of the Singh Sabha (Hindus), and now the enemies of 'orthodox ideology' (Western academics in India and abroad) and those that follow their episteme (Singh, Gurtej 1996: 16). Of these 'pretenders' he names Oberoi and McLeod who take on a monstrous caricature: 'It is for scholars like you (conference delegates) to suggest how this unfortunate country can save itself from the hoofs of the goose-stepping Brahmin-Kshatriya centaur?' (Singh, Gurtej 1996: 21). Furthermore, anyone who persists in questioning various thorny textual 'controversies', like the 'authenticity' of the *mūla-mantra*, 'must be taken to be a base schemer, rather than an honest researcher' (Singh, Gurtej 1996: 19).

This thesis raises the 'unallowed' and unhallowed question of the multiplicity of interpretations, and argues not against Sahib Singh but Gurtej's interpretation of him, and the widespread belief that the GGS, as some kind of magical heirloom, can speak without interpretation to any context. For example, Harbans Singh's *The Message of Sikhism*, a book composed solely of selected quotations from the GGS, believes that mere translations alone under topic headings suffice to convey 'the basic tenets of Sikhism' (1968: vii). At the end of its introduction Mansukhani even writes, 'it is a matter of great satisfaction that Sardar Harbans Singh has brought the message of the Gurus to the notice of the English-knowing people and has thus fulfilled a long-felt need' (1968: xx) – and this without as much as a word on the problems involved with such an interpretive operation, though given its publication date it is perhaps

understandable. However such views are not at all antiquated, as can be seen from Rahi's recent publication (1999) of a selection of quotes from Manmohan Singh's (1969) translation of the GGS, which reproduces and reorganises its selections into a similar thematic format, led by the same universalist hope, and again without mention of the problems of cross-cultural translation (apart from Cole's inadequate preface discussed above). Likewise the GGS exists on the internet, along with word-indexes and word-counts, but glaringly without commentary, indicative of the ritualisation of its form over its content.

Given the fact that every translation involves interpretive choices anyway, it is too simplistic to assume that a translation can speak for itself, independent of interpretive contextualisation. To believe that the teaching (*guramati*) is contained in the text (*gurabāṇī*) as a matter of fact (*theoria*) is directly challenged by viewing *guramati* in relation to action (application and engagement) through and beyond the text in a *praxis* of the Word, not merely its textual reading and interpretation. Whether translations can speak for themselves or not does not eradicate the problem or opportunity that these English translations still need to be interpreted and recontextualised.

Contrary to apologetic and orthodox writers like Gurtej Singh, the GGS is here understood to exist in a field of multiple interpretations as it exists in multiple contexts spreading the globe; a necessary perspective if its teachings are to be communicated beyond the replicated context of the Gurduāra complex, which stands the 'same' largely oblivious of where one is situated in the world.⁶ Unlike Gurtej, the Gurūs themselves reveled in diversity and even defined the Supreme as 'ever-new', and everywhere differently manifest. Throughout Gurtej's context-insensitive account there is not a single mention about how the fixed and finally interpreted GGS is meant to relate to Sikhs today, let alone diaspora Sikhs.

However, Gurtej aside, there is a serious deconstructive critique of hermeneutics that goes beyond studying the contexts of the text and its interpreters, that reveals intractable problems of incommensurability. Even beyond Sontag's (1994) argument that in interpretation poetic form is reduced to an essentialised semantic content, this critique concerns the endless deferral and difference of meaning, 'God' or any 'transcendental signified'. It is argued that hermeneutics rests upon the assumption that it can discover and re-present the meanings of any text; basically, the signifier can signify the transcendental signified. Derrida's (1974) deconstruction disrupts any attempt at simple re-presentation of meaning, given that this ignores the difficulty of translation and the instability of meaning due to the endless deferral of the

⁶ One has only to recall the inflated 'chairs-and-table' hokum in the diaspora, where to gain extra 'spiritual authenticity' langar halls (community kitchens) were stripped of their 'Western' chairs and tables in favour of floor sitting to mimic Panjab Gurduāras.

signified into another signifier, which creates a 'trace' at no point in which is the signified ever realised as it is. Simply put, hermeneutics ignores the trace of the Other in its significations which assume a structure of unity, or givenness, in the sign.

Thus for redress, as charted above, two further avenues were explored. One, offered by Bernstein (1983), who charts a course beyond 'relativism and objectivism'. The other by Caputo (1987), who acknowledges the strength of the deconstructive arguments, and attempts to radicalise hermeneutics by 'going through' the crucible of difference. Because both acknowledge the importance of *praxis* their work is relevant, but to the extent that they seem to be promoting some kind of universal theory of hermeneutics their views remain problematic. Thus a different solution is required, one that involves the formulation of a 'contextual hermeneutics' that arises from the GGS's own hermeneutic claims, the Sikh tradition itself, as well as Western hermeneutic theory. And one which focuses on *praxis*, wherein meaning arises from an engagement with everyday life, prioritising the ambiguity of lived experience over the presumed 'ideality' of the text. This contextualised hermeneutic *praxis* is assumed to withstand in part the challenge of deconstruction.

3.1. Colonialism, orientalism and modernism

Given the importance of temporality to the focus on *praxis*, any study of the GGS would have to acknowledge the various historical trajectories and contexts of power that certain interpretations of Gurū Nānak's teaching in English have operated in, in order to understand their assumptions and conclusions. In this respect, the British imperial background, the development of orientalist discourses and the legacies of Enlightenment thought, contextualise the current argument. Both scholarly translations and interpretations of Gurū Nānak's teachings (concretised by McLeod) and those rendered by the Sikh tradition itself (comprising Singh Sabha exegetes) are historically linked and share similar assumptions. Understandings of Gurū Nānak's teachings have been immersed in various interpretive contexts whose fabric is woven within a history of colonialism, orientalism and a reformist modernism.

It is important to acknowledge here that the very idea of history in European thought itself is inseparable from, and emergent with, the colonial project to master the Other: 'At base, the myth of a value free, "scientific" view of the past, the myth of the beauty of order, the myth of the story of history as a simple representation of the continuity of events, authorised nothing less than the construction of world reality' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1995: 355). History became a tool that had to disguise its own interpretive nature under the banner of science, in order to (re)write the past. History developed into a scientific discipline, which 'generated a particular historiographic ideology: a single narrative truth which was "simply" the closest

possible representation of events' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin: 1995: 355). In short, to be historically named by an imperial discourse is to gain a legitimate existence in a new 'order' that banishes the 'iniquitous chaos' of the previous age.

What is largely understood as Sikhism today is the direct result of late 19th century reform movements, which occurred during the colonial administration of the Panjab. This thesis, produced in a Western academic context, is inevitably and paradoxically both a rejection and a development of that orientalist foundation. Though the very terms and tools of that discourse may be deconstructed, the fact that the debate is conducted in European languages confounds any essentialist or puritanical analysis.

Both the indological study of 'Sikhism' and the tradition itself grew out of a decisive interaction with the British colonial administration. Any current interpretation must therefore recognise this background, and thereby become vigilant not to presuppose and replicate the same orientalist assumptions that not only misrepresent Gurū Nānak's teaching but considerably distort them.

A discourse representing the 'East' to the 'West' was instigated by the British East India Company soon after its conquest and colonisation of India (c.1770–1820). The broad context of that early orientalist discourse developed alongside the European Enlightenment, as this 'convergence of oriental and Enlightenment discourse facilitated the coalescing of important notions of modernity, citizenship, and rationality' (Breckenridge & Van der Veer 1993: 7). From the outset oriental knowledge was closely bound to the power of imperial governance through self-serving patronage. Such governance was only possible by producing indigenous elites (re)educated via the standards, codes and categories of English schooling and administration. Thus the 'fathers of orientalism in India furthered colonial centralization by subordinating the Indian intelligentsia to English epistemological authority' (Ludden 1993: 253). Therefore European scholars and Christian missionaries set in motion a whole array of images of the East through their writings and their translations of various indigenous texts into European languages. These understandings were tied as closely to their own context of rationalism and empiricism, progress and freedom, as they were to those they were attempting to describe.

European orientalist understandings of Indian texts, with their assumptions of textual unity, linear reading and the coherence of unfolding arguments, resulted in radically new ways of engagement and even in 'new texts', alien to Indian understandings. The appropriation of the 'text' and the imposition of foreign narrative forms obviously enabled the Europeans to possess and manage the text's 'meanings' for their own purposes. This colonial dominance led to a powerful discourse that, as Ludden (1993: 259) argues, 'factualised' the East.

It is not the intention here to enter the general debate about colonialism (material change) or orientalism (symbolic discourse), but to introduce a few micro examples of their operation in relation to the GGS. For example the European non-musical, non-sung prose versions of the GGS reflected a Western 'reading', resulting in the 'librification' or better 'bookification' of its sacred utterances. The aim here is to provide an overview of the colonial background and how it assisted the interpretation of Gurū Nānak's writings to become significantly skewed.⁷ To this end only some of the European presuppositions will be looked at as they impinge upon the understanding of the GGS.

Due to the late annexation of the Panjab by the British which was completed in 1849, orientalist understandings were already an established resource of 'veritable wisdom'. Yet, because of the rapid growth in industrial capitalism, a transformation occurred in that very 'oracle' of the orient. Ludden (1993: 267) argues that whereas before 1850 science had turned knowledge about India into facts backed by the power of colonial rule, after 1850 a more abstracted discourse was being woven into this colonial knowledge that concerned social theory (of Hegel, Mill, Marx and Weber). This orientalist process therefore became significantly more theorised and abstract. That is to say, it is after the 1850s that the major split between the political facts of *theoria* and the interpretive *praxes* of various social groups is evidenced. Orientalism 'became objectified by the ideology of science as a set of factualized statements' about reality and thus became 'detached epistemologically from politics by a culture that objectivized the world as a collection of scientific observations with universal validity'(Ludden 1993: 252).

Such discourses occurred during times of unprecedented change. After the annexation in 1849, the Panjab began to operate within the context of something approaching a global economy, with the introduction of bureaucratic governance under the rule of new laws and codes, new forms of communication and travel (the printing press, post and telegraph offices, road and railways), and reforms to the agrarian system and new channels of trade. These changes inevitably prompted different responses, instigating major revival and reform movements. The many material changes, combined with orientalist ideology and its dissemination throughout the Panjab via a network of missionary schools, and with the increasing instances of conversions to Christianity, provoked the formation of the Singh Sabhas. These in turn led to the construction of radically new socio-religious identities and boundaries. Yet, to recall the complicity between academia and Sikhs exegesis, these new self-understandings were created in consonance with an unacknowledged acceptance of oriental knowledge and its inherent superiority.

⁷ For a recent overview of the subject area as it pertains to South Asia see King 1999a.

However, this assimilative process did not reflect a passive acceptance and simple internalisation of imperial codes, but entailed an active promotion of elite culture, sold on the modernist ideals of progress and a romantic return to a past golden era of the Gurūs. These indigenous (*Tat Khālsā*) elites aimed to reconstruct for themselves an ideal reading of their past 'history', and concomitantly purge the present of all 'Brahmanical' influence and the 'degeneracy', especially as witnessed in the *Sanatana* culture. This 'ritualistic' and 'idol worshipping' culture was understood by them, with their newly emerging modern consciousness, as not only alien and opposed to the Gurū's teachings in the GGS, but increasingly more composed of largely 'Hindu' 'religious' practices. Sharing, to some extent, Imperial judgements about the lesser qualities of these Indians, given the British favouring of Sikhs especially in the Army, they set about creating in direct contradistinction to 'Hindu practices', new 'Tat Khālsā' ones.

Oberoi (1994) conceives of the transition from pre-colonial to colonial times, which split the Singh Sabhas into two factions, through an ideological and overly simplistic passage from diversity to uniformity. This assumption surfaces throughout his book as a simple dichotomy between the oral Hindu-Sikh *Sanatana* culture, deemed fluid, ambiguous, highly diverse, and timeless with internally complex identities, and the textual Sikh *Tat Khālsā* modern culture, subsequently designated fixed, rational, exclusive, linear, progressive and composed of uniform identities. Whilst Oberoi's observations chart the colonial influence in detail, they tend to ignore, as Arvind-pal Singh (1999) points out, the significance of the text-tradition within Sikh practice prior to colonialism, and only after colonisation is established, do they begin to assume the orientalist dualities between primary/secondary, indigenous/foreign and speech/writing. There was however a process which Arvind-pal Singh (1995: 223) calls 'a theologisation of text transmission', that was clearly the result of internalising Western modes of thinking and textual practices magnified by a homogenising print culture.

The indigenous elites (*Tat Khālsā Singh Sabha* and the largely Hindu *Ārya Samāj*) rejected Hindu-Sikh *Sanatana*, culture just as the British rejected 'Hindoo' culture as stagnant, backward, subconscious or childlike. These indigenous elites were having to contend with radically new forms of representation of an alien culture which incorporated the influential ideas of language as description, history as linear narrative, and religion as monotheism. All three were identified as valued standards, as is evident by their eager and prolific mimetic reproductions in newspaper articles, tracts and books.

Language, history and monotheism

Language and culture are so intertwined that each is a carrier of the other. Thus to set up the English language as normative was perhaps the most powerful way for the British to impose their own cultural as well as political agenda. English education would thus produce, in Macaulay's phrase, 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect' (1952: 729). The indigenous elites in the Panjab came through the British educational system in the 1860s, which by that time was wholly informed by over half a century of oriental ethnographies, reports and translations. Within such asymmetrical power relations, where legitimisation and recognition operated as prime motives, self-expression for the Sikh elites, let alone translation of the teachings of the GGS, could only reflect an obsequious tone of emulation, since to speak and be heard within the colonial context required conformity to the codes and categories of the dominating people, their law, culture and language.

There is then an inherent bias built into the very psyche of an indigenous elite which attempts to translate into English anything of 'worth' with the loaded dice of colonial discourse.⁸ Any interpretive activity, from the simplest gesture to the translation of the subtlest passages of the GGS, would naturally reflect that tone of deferential mimesis. It is upon such theoretical or epistemic conditions that the Singh Sabha elites and the orientalist discourse developed in complicit reciprocity. This complicity continued through the Singh Sabha reforms, founded in 1873, through the dominance of *Tat Khālsā* ideology, transmutating into the politics of the Akali movement in the 1920s, and resurfacing in today's polemics between the academic tradition and indigenous scholarship:

Both the Singh Sabha tradition and the academic tradition within which Oberoi writes are historically linked. Both represent culture to, and within, the dominant symbolic order of the western tradition of knowledge as dominated by the concept of *episteme*. While both borrow their conceptual framework from this dominant culture, one passes it off as tradition, while the other portrays itself as the pursuit of disinterested knowledge. (Singh, Arvind-pal 1995: 236).

One important example of the imposition of this 'dominant symbolic order' was through the subservient mimicry of 'Western monotheism'. If writing history is always re-writing history, then there is much evidence of this re-interpretive strategy during colonial times.⁹ The reformist, Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–94) 'projected into the Hindu past, into a lost age of Hinduism, the qualities of Christianity which

⁸ See Singh, Arvind-pal 1995; 1998 for the most insightful analyses of this whole 'interpretive process'.

⁹ Pollock (1993: 10) gives two major uses of history in South Asian colonialism: the employment of the Purāṇic myth of the four ages in progressive decline, and the myth of pure origins and its duality between Aryan and non-Aryan races.

seemingly gave Christians their strength' (Nandy 1983: 23). His version of the Great Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata*, concerned the historicisation and moralisation of *Kṛṣṇa*, a god often otherwise noted for his maverick and licentious escapades (Nandy 1983: 23). The influential reformer Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) was altogether more thorough in this project. He introduced for the urban middle classes a whole array of 'ideas of organized religion, a sacred text, monotheism and, above all, a patriarchal godhead, in his misreading of Sankara he shifted the locus of magicality from everyday femininity to a transcendent male principle' (Nandy 1983: 21ff). Yet in trying to place authority in both an Indian past and colonial present, his project was obviously not without its problems. Laine notes that there was 'an inherent contradiction in Rammohun's thought: the citation of the Vedas as sacred authoritative text while at the same time propounding an ideal of universalist theism, based primarily on reason' (1983: 170). Furthermore, Laine argues, his arguments 'lacked an element central to Indian religious thought, i.e., the experiential dimension. The authority of the text, just as the authority of the *guru*, lay in the testimony to an experience of truth; not truth as discursively reasoned or exegetically derived, but truth as seen directly' (1983: 171).

Following suit in Christianising Hinduism were Dayanand Saraswati (1824–83) and Vivekananda (1863–1902), who promulgated 'Hinduism' as an 'organised religion' with its own 'priests', 'churches' and 'missionaries', having its own 'Holy Book(s)', and 'linear', 'objective' 'history', that spoke of Hinduism as a 'monotheism' (Nandy 1983: 24–5). Similarly, the monotheistic construction had a lasting effect on the Singh Sabha elites and their mimetic narrations within the Sikh traditions. With the rise of social theorising after the 1850s, this construction largely took place within a framework of Enlightenment assumptions that can be called 'modernist', with their emphasis upon a universal reason over and above direct experience. Such a 'modernist outlook' informs much Sikh and academic interpretive thinking. It is therefore important to detail a few of its salient characteristics that operate to create 'Sikh-ism', before turning to the construction of that Sikh-ism into a monotheism.

Modernism

There is no single origin of the Enlightenment nor is there one modernity (Kolocotroni, Goldman & Taxidou 1998). However there are persistent themes that characterise and are associated with these terms and their times. Although, Europe and North America, with their 'advanced' machine industries, humanism and liberal democracies, gained power not only to control nature but also to exploit other peoples and their resources, their success in doing so rode on the backs of those they conquered. The flip-side of the modern project is obviously the cost of European imperialism to those colonised, the

domination and exploitation of the lower classes, as well as its own alienating tendency with the massive bureaucratisation of life and the destruction of nature.

The actual ideas and themes cannot therefore be separated from these material outcomes. They can be summarised as: a Eurocentric and theocentric bias towards the written Book and literature in general; the absolutisation of reason in an atomised individual, culminating in science and the search for universal laws; a progressive and linear understanding of history with authority of authenticity invested in a past foundational origin; the simple unitary and hierarchical nature of all substances; and finally the belief in such transcendent verities as 'Truth', 'God', or 'Beauty' as self-evident facts (Cahoone 1996). All the above characteristics of such a modern epistemic approach result in the inability to engage with or even tolerate the difference of the Other. Modernity's project, within the colonial context, could be characterised as that which seeks to turn the Other into the imperial-Western Same, or otherwise reject and subordinate the Other as irrational and subhuman.

It will be shown how the differences of the GGS soon get overwritten by an orientalist/modernist discourse that transforms Gurū Nānak and the GGS into 'strict' and 'uncompromising' advocates of 'monotheism'. Such a modernist discourse manages this by prioritising an abstract and scientific knowledge (*theoria/orientalism, techne/colonialism*) gained from a self-interested translation of texts, over an actual engagement with the Other represented by practising Sikhs through an equal and mutually co-determining *praxis* (*phronesis*). This engagement would demand not only that the Other's difference is theoretically entertained but pragmatically accepted as of equal authority.¹⁰ Smith (1996: 316) argues that 'postmodernity would have to try to find a way to defend the practical experience of reality *from the hegemony of autonomous theory*'. But does this not presuppose an idealistic set up, where an equality of languages, position and power is assumed? Can there be *praxis* then in an imperial and now post-colonial context, when English is the language of discourse, power, law, and government? Or, to put it the other way round, is the SLS and/or Panjabi essential to the Gurūs' teaching? One would expect not, given the universal claims made about their teachings, and the Gurūs' own rejection of divine languages and consequent use of the vernaculars.

It is not surprising then that Arvind-pal Singh (1995, 1999) argues that any attempt at cross-cultural engagement must first deconstruct the assumptions embedded in the cultural discourses that had imposed upon indigenous discourses alien categories which were taken from ethnographic and orientalist projects of the colonial era. Smith (1998: 276) provides an apposite example, he states that the 'most common form of classifying religions, found both in native categories and in scholarly

¹⁰ See During 1995: 125–9, for an overview of some of the issues.

literature, is dualistic and can be reduced, regardless of what differentium is employed, to “theirs” and “ours”.’ He cites the following examples: ‘our religion’ / ‘their religion’, where the latter is described as ‘heathenism’, ‘paganism’, ‘idolatry’, and relates the obvious dualities: ‘true religion’ / ‘false religion’, ‘religion’ / ‘superstition’, ‘monotheism’ / ‘polytheism’. The latter three are all used by the Western orientalist with regard to the Sikh case and internalised by the indigenous Singh Sabha reform movement.

Arvind-pal Singh therefore concludes his paper by asking, ‘how are subaltern communities, such as the Sikhs, to *articulate* “religion”, “scripture” and “tradition” within the language and categories of a dominant culture?’ (1995:236). This thesis makes a preliminary attempt at engaging with such questions. Understanding such broad post-Enlightenment biases can only occur through examples within specific contexts. To flesh out such presuppositions at work in the translation and interpretation of the GGS, the work of various European and indigenous scholars is now briefly analysed.

3.2. Theorisation and theologisation of the *gura-sabadu praxis*

It should be understood that the main argument here relates less to the actual translative process and more to an interpretive one; it matters little how Gurū Nānak’s words are translated, in comparison to what his words are interpreted to mean, i.e. into which context Gurū Nānak is made to speak. It is these subsequent interpretive constructions that reveal the stamp of orientalist history on the GGS corpus, forged in the broad trope of post-Enlightenment modernism and sealed with the idea of ‘monotheism’. An overview of the transformation that occurred in the interpretations of the GGS, from the 17th century onwards, will show these assumptions at work forcing a split between *theoria* and *praxis*.

Early ‘imitative’ and ‘iterative’ exegesis

Gurdās Bhalla (c.1558–c.1637) is the closest ‘exegete’ to Gurū Nānak, being a contemporary of the third to the sixth Sikh Gurūs, as well as being Gurū Arjan’s amanuensis for the GGS. Often noted as the first Sikh ‘theologian’, his works are highly revered and some are understood as providing the ‘key’ to the GGS. Gurdās repeats the Gurūs’ teachings, emphasising salient themes, rather than forging a (separate) philosophical system. He thus embarks upon interpretive iteration not a hermeneutic theologisation. Even though Gurdās (1962: *vāru* 1, 23.3; tr. McLeod 1984: 64) states, ‘here in this era of darkness and strife he [Gurū Nānak] revealed that God is one’,¹¹ this

¹¹ The general focus on interpretive frames over translation as such, justifies use of McLeod’s translations whilst allowing a critique of his interpretations.

is framed by, and always implies, a context of earnest enactment: 'he who receives the Guru's teachings must live a life which reflects their truth. Let him take his place in the company of the faithful, absorbing their virtue in the presence of the Word' (Gurdās: 1962: *Vāru* 3, 9.1-2; tr. McLeod 1984: 66).

Other imitative and iterative exegetes are found in the hagiographical tradition of writing *Janamsākhīs* (birth evidences) that arose during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The varying traditions included styles that have been delineated by McLeod. In some of these texts there is a 'blend of discourse and commentary' indicating 'commentators rather than narrators' iterating, repeating Gurū Nānak's verse found in the GGS (McLeod 1980: 57–9).

A number of manuals concerning the community's conduct (*rahitnāmas*) which claim the authority of the Gurū's Word, became influential in promoting the first interpretations of the Gurūs' teachings (*guramati*). One of the most important pre-Singh Sabha texts, the *Prashan-uttar* of the late c.18th century attributed to Bhāi Nand Lāl (1633–1715) similarly revered by the Panth and a contemporary of Gurū Gobind Singh, influenced subsequent understandings of *guramati*. In it there is a *gurū-sikh* dialogue wherein the Gurū explains the three major forms in which the Divine/True-Guru is manifested:

I am manifested in three ways: the formless or invisible (*niraguṇa*), the material or visible (*saraguṇa*), and the divine Word (*gura-sabadu*). The first of these transcends all that is material. It is the *neti neti* of the Vedas, the spirit which dwells in every heart as light permeates the water held in a vessel. The second is the sacred scripture, the Granth...

The Sikh himself is the third form which I take, that Sikh who is forever heedful of the words of sacred scripture (*gurabaṇī*). He who loves and trusts the Word of the Guru is himself an ever-present manifestation of the Guru... The Gursikh who is faithful in serving his Master will find himself cleansed from all sense of self-dependence. (Nand Lāl 1968: 191–4; tr. McLeod 1984: 75–7).

The first two manifestations reflect the two truths previously mentioned as *nirguṇa-brahman* (*paramārthya-satya*) and *saguṇa-brahman* (*saṁvṛti-satya*), here understood respectively as the traditional apophatic 'not this, not this' of the Upaniṣads, and the Granth, (rather than a personal deity). Yet beyond this duality, which makes no unambiguous reference to a theological Being, a third is added, that of the *gura-sabadu*, and most crucially this is understood as the Sikh who heeds the Gurū's Word in his daily activities. Thus the negative 'theology' of *nirguṇa* is coupled not only with the more affirmative textual conception of *saguṇa*, but also with the *praxis* of the *gura-sabadu* of a traveller on the way: listening, reading, reciting, singing, praising, and serving.

It is this third aspect that becomes divorced from and subordinated under the other two, as the theorisation of the *nirguṇa-saguṇa* nonduality metamorphoses into the

European transcendent-immanent duality. And with *praxis* subordinated, transcendence begins to dominate immanence, creating an hierarchical monotheistic theology. Subsequently *praxis* itself becomes increasingly isolated and concretised into a particular discipline ritualised for its own sake. It is evident from the mid to late 19th centuries, various radical transformations occurred in the Panjab, from the British annexation in 1849 to the reform movements of the Singh Sabhas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Grewal 1994: 128–56). But the evidence for a change in outlook towards *theoria*, that emphasises textuality, belief, doctrine, exclusivity, prose and monotheism, has yet to be outlined.

3.3. Nineteenth and Twentieth century Western scholarship

In certain modernist, Enlightenment understandings reason and language are assumed to be beyond the contingencies of history, aiding the belief that European scholars could access the ‘truths’ of Eastern ‘texts’, having once mastered their languages, regardless of their contexts. But with a contextualising hermeneutics any form of inquiry that tries to deny its interpretive lens by masking its own historicity is challenged, thus putting into question its claim to discover ahistorical truths.

Biblical hermeneutics at first paralleled the scientific paradigm of the Enlightenment. ‘Following this paradigm, biblical scholars constructed a model for interpreting texts which paralleled the way scientists were interpreting the world. They assumed that texts were like the world, stable and objective realities whose details, if examined with appropriate methods, would reveal their meaning to the unbiased observer’ (Herzog 1983: 106). Such paradigmatically predisposed observers classified the Other in accordance with their own cultural and ideological logic. For example the proliferating ‘-isms’ e.g.: deism, theism, monotheism, pantheism, atheism, agnosticism, panentheism – were used as scientific ‘truths’ to totalise and thereby finalise interpretive meaning through abstract re-presentation. Thus, for ‘the modern to think God is to try to find the right abstract name – the right ism – for affirming or denying on modern rational grounds the existence and nature of God’ (Tracy 1994: 309). The abstract element in modern rationality is challenged by locating one’s discourse diachronically. In the light of which the finality of interpretation can but seem premature and oppressive.

Despite modernity’s belief, there is no set of abstract propositions, no rational, clear, and distinct ideas, no subsuming concept, no rational propositional doctrine – in a word no *ism* – that is ever adequate for naming and thinking God. (Tracy 1994: 309).

During the colonial period in which the Singh Sabhas thrived, these and similar assumptions of the ‘modernist outlook’ were internalised. Thus a significant change in Sikh exegesis occurred during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It stopped being

imitative in style since it no longer was given in poetic form, but in prose, and was increasingly less iterative of the scriptures' nondual themes, but sought to explain itself and *guramati* unambiguously, systematically and eventually 'academically', as indeed it was called to do so by its colonial masters. And in answering the British administration, the Christian missionaries and the Arya Samaj, to re-present their *praxes* as a codified and delimited theories, they struggled and still struggle to provide anything but inessential information (in Benjamin's and Sontag's senses). Their exclusive interpretation of the Sikh traditions as one 'world religion' with its own book, is a consequence of such skewed motivations.

Colonial translations and interpretations of the Gurū Granth Sāhib

Ernest Trumpp (1828–85), a German missionary and philologist patronised by the British Raj, classed the Sikh teachings as 'atheistic' and 'amoral', after translating part of the GGS in 1877. In the preface, seeking help from native Sikh Granthīs at Lahore, he states:

... though they professed to understand the Granth, they had no knowledge with the old grammatical forms or of the obsolete words; they could only give me some traditional explanations, which frequently proved wrong, as I found them contradicted by other passages... they had not even a clear insight into the real doctrines of the Granth. (1989: vi.)

However unfortunate Trumpp's experiences were, his comments and work as a whole disclose the assumption that all language is understood as being descriptive, that religious practice is presumed to be essentially semantic, that religion is centred on a text and that the text concerns doctrines. Exemplifying Ludden's thesis of empiricism supporting orientalism, Trumpp saw his translation as a scientific endeavour: 'I wished to lay a solid foundation and to give a translation which should be of scientific value' (1989: vii.) Needless to say this scientific knowledge is intended for the West. The European assumptions about how a text should be written (clearly, consistently, following one linear narrative and with developed argument) need hardly be pointed out in the following passage on the absence of these features in the GGS:

The Sikh Granth is... incoherent and shallow in the extreme, and couched at the same time in dark and perplexing language, in order to cover these defects. It is for us Occidentals a most painful and almost stupefying task, to read only a single Rāg, and I doubt if any ordinary reader will have the patience to proceed to the second Rāg, after he shall have perused the first. It would therefore be a mere waste of paper to add also the minor Rāgs, which only repeat, in endless variations, what has been already said in the great Rāgs over and over again, without adding the least to our knowledge. (1989: vii.)

Although Trumpp acknowledges the musical aspect of the GGS, it does not seem to dissuade him from reading the GGS as if it were a novel, or a philosophical treatise; repetition is therefore not understood as being integral with the text's form and purpose. Nevertheless, Trumpp's obvious dislike of the GGS did not stop him from translating over a quarter of it albeit as a 'labour of hate'. This is because his 'labour of love' was contributing to scientific knowledge, which is owned by the West: 'The Sikh Granth, which will always keep its place in the history of religion, lies now open before us, and we know authentically what their Gurus taught' (1989: viii). Knowledge here has little to do with the *gura-sabadu praxis*; authenticity is defined in terms of the science of semantic translation for the discipline of Indian philology, rather than being located in the performance of the text and the application of its teachings to one's life situations. This naive belief that knowledge can be had apart from its engagement or application exemplifies the Enlightenment bias of *theoria* over *praxis*. However, such an attitude does not make Trumpp's translations worthless, as many indignant Sikh scholars have concluded. In fact Trumpp's translations can often be insightful in their literal detail and consistency, unlike some later Singh Sabha ideological translations. It is Trumpp's interpretation, rather than his translation, that is problematic and offensive.

Trumpp is certain that the GGS's 'correct' interpretation revolves around 'tenets' and 'doctrines' (1989: xcvi), not performance and application, and that its doctrine is an 'atheism' based on a dissolution of the self into *nirvāṇa*, (1989: cv-cvi), despite its 'pantheistic' statements. Reading Gurū Nānak as though he was giving a systematic description of the Ultimate is bound to leave the modern occidental or oriental interpreter in a quandary:

... after the strongest pantheistic expressions, the Supreme is again addressed as a self-conscious personality, who governs all things and takes care of all creatures and with whom man endeavours to enter into personal relations. Contradictory sentences of this kind we find a great many in the Granth. (1989: ci).

It is not surprising then that Trumpp could not accept that such a 'self-evidently shallow' and 'self-contradictory' text should have any moral teachings or intellectual value, even when both of these are explicitly expressed and attributed to the divine:

To this personification of the Supreme it is owing, that *intellectual* and *moral* qualities are frequently ascribed to him, though, strictly speaking, there is no room for them in this system... We need hardly remark, that this whole system is contradictory to itself. (1989:ci, cv).

In later chapters it will be shown how Gurū Nānak employs contradictory lines of thought to express various nondual truths. It suffices to show here how Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction leads Trumpp into inappropriate judgment, as with

many subsequent scholars of the GGS who have not been able to think contradiction differently. Trumpp concludes,

From the foregoing remarks it is plain enough, that in a religion, where the highest object of life is the extinction of individual existence, there can be no room for a system of moral duties; we need therefore hardly point out, how wrong the statement of some authors is, that Sikhism is a *moralising Deism*. (1989: cix-cx)

Though Trumpp concludes that 'the Granth, as regards its contents, is perhaps the most shallow and empty book that exists' (1989: cxxii), he is nevertheless an important figure in Sikh Studies. For it is in indignant reaction to his interpretation of the GGS as an immoral or 'amoral atheism', that practically all subsequent interpretations take their position, by positing its dialectical opposite: 'moral theism'. Yet, both of these extremes, and all the isms in between, share the same modernist assumptions that privilege abstraction over application.

Max Macauliffe (1837–1913), a Deputy Commissioner and later Divisional Judge, set about the task of repairing the damage caused by Trumpp's interpretive comments, (rather than his translations). He did this in an innovative and much appreciated move by performing his translations in conjunction with a group of indigenous scholars, revealing the first overt signs of the complicity between Singh Sabha exegesis, colonialism and orientalism – even though Macauliffe resigned his official position to align himself much more closely to the Singh Sabha scholars and become their English spokesman. However Macauliffe was still operating under the dictum of knowledge as science, and believed in the finality of translation and interpretation: 'It appears, therefore, that it would on every account be well to fix the translation of the many exceedingly difficult passages scattered broadcast through the Sikh sacred writings' (1993: viii). And, predictably, this 'fixing' entailed a re-writing of Sikh thought as monotheistic. Macauliffe's magnum opus, *The Sikh Religion*, published in 1909, and officially accepted by the Sikh Panth, played a crucial role in restoring self-respect for the Sikhs and also provided them with a powerful voice for political reform. It did this by writing a detailed history of the Sikh tradition as well as immersing that history in abundant translations from the GGS, thus setting a template for subsequent Singh Sabha scholars to reduplicate. But one of the main reasons why it was such an influential landmark in the Sikh tradition was because it made the otherness of the GGS conform to the stature of Christian monotheism, and of course, written in his English voice, it stood for power and reason, if not providence. On the first page of his great work, he writes that in India there were 'great exponents of Indian monotheism' (1993: xxxix). Further he states,

... the cardinal principle of the Gurus and Bhagats whose writings find place in the sacred books of the Sikhs was the unity of God. This is everywhere inculcated in the

Sikh sacred writings with ample and perhaps not unnecessary iteration, considering the forces Sikhism had to contend with in an age of ignorance and superstition. (1993: li)

In as much as the GGS spoke the ‘same’ unity of Christian monotheism it was worthy of praise. In diametrical contrast to Trumpp, Sikh thought was now cast as ‘monotheistic’ and ‘moral’, given that it moved beyond the ‘ignorance and superstition’ of Hindu-India proper. It is not long before this ‘Indian monotheism’ with its inherent diversity, begins to imitate a Semitic version, renowned for its radical uniqueness and exclusivity in the eyes of a new ‘school’ of interpreters. A host of Singh Sabha scholars now, not Europeans, begin to make the transformation complete. Kāhan Singh Nābhā (1861–1938) who worked with Macauliffe, even travelling with him to Europe, states:

There are in fact several religions and of these one is supreme. This is the way revealed by the ten Gurus... It is known as the Sikh religion and its basic doctrinal position may be described as follows... This [*mūla-mantra*] means that God is one and unique... In order to know God one must know the Guru. The Guru was manifested in the ten personal Gurus and is now eternally manifest in the Guru Granth Sahib. (Nābhā 1930: 576–7; tr. McLeod 1984: 133).

With Teja Singh (1894–1958), this exclusivity not only concerns belief and theory, but also practice: ‘There is one, and only one, way to worship God. It is to extol him, to glorify him, to sing his praises, to “take the Name”, believe in the Name, repeat the Name’ (Teja, Singh 1952: 24; tr. McLeod 1984: 141). Also commenting on the *mūla-mantra*, now promoted to the ‘creed’ of Sikhism, Jodh Singh (1882–1981) states, ‘What these words mean is that this Being is one and alone’, and then goes on to list the attributes of this One and characteristically shows an exclusivity and imperialistic distrust of diversity:¹²

There are, of course, many who claim to have been sent into the world by God, each indicating a different way to him. The result is that the ordinary person is confused... It is by means of the Word alone that the disciple is made one with the [Sikh] Guru... Only by heeding the Guru’s Word can one obtain the divine Name... the Guru’s Word is the same as the Gurus’ utterances [as recorded in the scriptures]... And so the scripture which incorporates the utterances of the succession of personal Gurus is in fact the Guru. (n.d.: ch.1, 2, 6, 8 *passim*; McLeod 1984: 136–40).

The idea that the ‘truth’ of the Gurū and the Word are totally captured by the text, where one need only look and read, indicates how much the Singh Sabha scholars

¹² Hans (1988: 45; 59–61; 102–7; 139; 184) charts the development of the ‘us and them’ dialectic during the Gurū period and after. Nabha (1984) provides a good example of the anti-Hindu polemic precisely because the Hindu perspective was seen as a nefarious polytheism that stood in ‘clear’ opposition to the Sikh/Christian moral monotheism.

were unaware of providing formulaic and systematic interpretations of the Word. It also reveals the naiveté of their belief that the text's, and *ipso facto* the Gurū's, truths could be so unproblematically identified and represented independent of their application. It also signifies a break with the indigenous interpretive traditions, with their more flexible, oral exegesis, not to mention its previous link with the *gura-sabadu praxis*. In this respect, not only does 'God' become theorised and theologised, but the way (*māragu*) to him undergoes a systematisation, akin to a canonisation of the Word and Name into a particular mantric technique, wherein remembrance (*simaraṇa*) is equated with recitation (*japu*). Sāhib Singh writes:

Charity, pious bathing, breath-control, and Upanishadic theories of creation are all doomed to failure as means of overcoming man's separation from God... Regular disciplined remembrance of God is the one and only method... This practice of *simaran* or *jap* is the only means whereby man's separation from God can be overcome... *simaran* is the fundamental feature of Sikh belief. (Singh, Sāhib 1962: vol 1:35–8; tr. McLeod 1984: 144–6).

Yet this thesis shows that the Word includes *mantra* but radically moves beyond it to a process that involves understanding and communication. This is not to suggest that the works of the Singh Sabha scholars are without value or insight, for they provide both of these often in abundance, but only to acknowledge that they are interpretive and that they interpret in a fundamentalist way, one which became increasingly overdetermined by Christian and imperial categories and assumptions.

With Gopal Singh's translation and interpretation of the GGS (1960) a more concerted process begins with the systematic theologisation of the teachings of the GGS. Gopal seems puzzled as to why this has not occurred before:

...but for a few individuals, it has never occurred to the community to define its basic tenets, and to answer the seeming contradictions in these tenets, in short to attempt an integrated account of the Sikh view of life... [Sikhs] have never seriously attempted a scientific and cogent exposition of the doctrines of their faith. (1993: xx)

Given the previous discussion of the *gura-sabadu praxis*, and how this was subordinated under the more theoretically predisposed orientalism of the colonial era, it is understandable why this has not happened before the imposition of Western ideology. Indeed, the extent to which Gopal cannot perceive the alienness of these ideas and the inevitable subordinate tone of his writing, is telling of the need such scholars felt to portray the Sikh religion as 'modern' and 'scientific' – i.e. as a worthy object in the eyes of empiricism in the post-imperial epoch. The voice of legitimacy is English, the concepts that hold currency, and to which one's own 'religion' is to be calibrated, are Christian, and the formula for the 'translation of the same' is the *mūla-mantra*:

Thus, it would be seen that the Sikh religion is strictly monotheistic, believing in nothing but the one Supreme God. Absolute yet All-pervading, the Eternal, the Creator, the Cause of causes, without enmity, without hate, both Immanent in His Creation and beyond it. (1993: xxvi)... The Theory of the doctrine of the Word, or the Name, can be explained in metaphysical terms thus. Not unlike the Christians, the Sikhs too believe that 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. (1993: xxxii)

The mimicry of Christian theology, with its bias for doctrines, complemented the scientific bent for empirical hypotheses and universal laws, as well as the philosophical desire for ultimate grounds in the pursuit of metaphysical truth. All three assumed logical reason as an unquestionable starting point. Together they operated in such a way as to marginalise the lived experiences of religious *praxis*. The focus shifted from the *gura-sabadu praxis* to possession and worship of, belief in and obedience to, the 'Holy-Book' via the identification of its literal words (*bāṇī*) with the psycho-social and cosmic Word (*sabadu*). It is little wonder then that a 'strict' monotheism can result from such tightly defined boundaries of religious practice and belief supported by essentialised understandings.

Thirty years later this 'strict monotheism' becomes 'uncompromising'. In the introduction to Talib's interpretation of his translation of the GGS (1991), he writes:

The creed that is embodied in the pages of the holy Granth Sahib and which is enunciated right at the opening in *Mūl Mantra*, is uncompromising monotheism. (1991: xlv-xlv)

Similar problems arise with the other English works on Sikh 'doctrine' and precisely for their focus on orthodoxy at the expense of orthopraxy. For example Massey (1991: 35, 91) following very much Singh Sabha and McLeod's thinking, argues against a nondual interpretation in favour of a monotheistic one, basing his analysis on a detailed overview of the *mūla-mantra*. Similarly, Jodh Singh (1989, 1990a) contrasts Hindu ascetics with the Sikh ideal with sections entitled 'Gurmukh the follower of Mulmantra'. Whilst these works are descriptively sensitive, (Singh even dedicates chapters to 'Sunya' a term often overlooked), they still remain theologically biased and modernist in orientation, and far too simplistic in their acute focus on the opening *mantra* of the GGS. A monotheism can only be constructed from the hymns of the Gurū's if the *nirguṇa* aspects of the divine, as well as the *gura-sabadu praxis* and their interrelations with the *sagūṇa* dimension, are consistently ignored. Furthermore within the GGS and the peripheral exegesis there is no equivalent term for 'monotheism', nor is there a term that the Gurūs themselves use to describe their teachings under one overarching abstract classification. Indeed, their focus was not doctrinal; it was not based on whether one believed in 'monotheism', but whether one was able to

remember the divine in action (*nāmu-mārga*), that is, seek, hear, and enact the Word of the Gurū.

While there are intimations of a monistic 'One' (*eku*) understood as a theistic Being (*hari, rāma*) but also as an absolute Void (*sunnu, nirabāṇu*) in the GGS, the way these statements (usually the former advocated and the latter ignored) were re-contextualised within the dichotomy between 'theism' and 'atheism', 'monotheism' or 'monism' is indicative of an alien interpretive process. Sikh elites therefore re-understood their heritage, by stitching together a Sikh 'religion' within the imperial narrative of a modern orientalism based on a mimetic re-presentation of the Christian tradition.

The myth of finality: McLeod's classic interpretation of *guramati*

McLeod's 1968 interpretation of the teachings of Gurū Nānak has been without rival for the past thirty years. However this thesis challenges his assertion, and now prevalent belief, that 'the whole of Gurū Nānak's thought revolves around his understanding of the nature of God' (McLeod 1996: 148). Only by ignoring the fact that the GGS prioritises *praxis* over *theoria* can a theology focused on 'beliefs' be constructed. McLeod's systematisation, based on the Enlightenment presuppositions of Descartes' 'clear and distinct ideas', does just that. However, due to the beguiling and all-pervasive nature of a paradigm, any one individual cannot be held responsible for employing its presuppositions. Nevertheless in the light of a sudden crack in the glass of a paradigm's self-transparency, it becomes ethically important to re-understand one's position and views. In his first monograph McLeod provides us with a 'creed of modernism', that tries to tame and capture the spirit of an 'unruly' genius:

The purpose of systematic theology is to construct a consistent framework, to develop a coherently integrated pattern out of what is dispersed throughout the record of an individual or corporate religious experience. In order to do this it is necessary to extract, analyse, and rearrange in a pattern which serves this particular purpose. By itself, however, such a pattern must be inadequate, for it will inevitably lose much of the spirit which prompted the original record. (1996: 176).

What 'systematic theology' has to do with the *gura-sabadu praxis* is an issue that remains unaddressed. Nevertheless, the obvious problem with 'extracting' and 'rearranging' a text to fit a 'coherent and consistent pattern' is that the pattern simply does not fit, it mishears the echo and distorts it beyond reasonable recognition; the presuppositions of the modernist creed make the choices of what is to be selected and presented, not the individual academic, nor the categories of the work itself. It is revealing then to see McLeod in the 1960s finding himself in the same modernist quandary over which ism provides the 'correct representation' of Gurū Nānak's

teachings, just as Trumpp was in the 1870s. Puzzling over monotheism or monism he writes,

If we are compelled to choose between these two polar conceptions our choice must settle upon the former [i.e., monotheist] alternative... Gurū Nānak's thought cannot be made to conform to the categories of *advaita* doctrine without equating his concept of God with the ultimately unreal *Īśvara* of Śaṅkara's philosophy. The total range of Gurū Nānak's thought makes this equation manifestly impossible and accordingly requires us to reject the monistic alternative... Strict pantheism is also excluded [contra Trumpp], for immanence is accompanied in the thought of Gurū Nānak by a notion of transcendence. If a label must be applied then monotheism is the label we must use, but it should be remembered that the vital expression of the One is through the many, through the infinite plurality of the creation. (McLeod 1996: 164–5).

Such an argument is spun by the modernist assumptions of closed, monolithic and abstract unities. Śaṅkara's advaitic *Īśvara* 'is' unreal. Pantheism 'must be strict' for it to be excluded. Identities here must be internally consistent and made. Gurū Nānak's thought once cast by Western science as monotheistic can only be monotheistic – because taking the 'total range' of Gurū Nānak's thought 'it is monotheistic'. McLeod's choice is dualistic and reductionistic: either monotheism or monism, implying that to understand a teaching it must be made into a complete and singular object of knowledge. Gurū Nānak's hymns are therefore totalised and transformed into an unambiguous system classified for 'all time' given the 'scientific' foundation of the interpretation. There is therefore no reason to re-understand his teaching in *praxis* since its basic pattern as (constructed) 'beliefs' have been elicited, systematised and classified.

Though McLeod shows obvious reluctance to simplify Gurū Nānak's thought, it is clear that the prevailing epistemology has the final say. One last example will suffice. Throughout Gurū Nānak's works there are obvious strands of his thought that can be understood under the idea of grace (*nadari*) and others under the theme of *karma* (*karamu*). McLeod again feels compelled to make a choice between them:

If it is inscribed in the record of one's former deeds then one meets the True *Gurū*.
(GGS: 421, AsA: 19, 5.2.)

Karma is one theory and the other is divine grace... The latter theory is the one we must accept, but not at the cost either of maintaining that Gurū Nānak denied the relevance of *karma* as far as this initial perception is concerned, or of admitting that at this point he was inconsistent... The quotation... above implies an inconsistency, but when the paucity of such references, direct or implied, is compared with the very considerable weight of emphasis which he lays upon his concept of divine grace there can be no doubt that in the last analysis it is this grace which must decide the issue. The solution which he himself provides to the seeming inconsistency is a compromise... (McLeod 1996: 204–5).

Despite the fact that McLeod is very careful to include *karma* in his discussion of grace, he nevertheless seeks to resolve textual tensions and differences into conceptual unities. Rather than understanding Gurū Nānak as speaking in different contexts at different levels, the modernist discourse creates a unified and level playing field where all can be seen and classified systematically and completely. So finally, 'from his extensive hymns... it is possible to frame a system which is complete in every respect' (McLeod 1997: 87). If the hidden depths and levels cannot be made visible and/or are inconsistent with that which can be seen, then they are ignored as irrelevant. It is noticeable that Gurū Nānak does not chose between *nadari* and *karamu*, nor did he make a compromise as McLeod claims, and nor do the specific references and general notions of *nadari*¹¹⁵ outnumber those of *karamu*¹⁶⁰, (see Chapter 5). McLeod succeeds in making what is essentially a modernist problem into Gurū Nānak's own dilemma. Yet, 'solutions', 'inconsistencies' and 'compromises' are scarcely related to Gurū Nānak's vocabulary but are rather integral with a modernist academic discourse.

Whether the perspective taken is academic or Singh Sabha, the same modernist assumptions are brought into play: clarity, consistency, simple systematisations and reductionist totalisations of various 'unities' such as: 'Sikh identity', 'scripture as book' and 'religion as monotheism'. Translation becomes transparent, the academic subject remains unquestioned and the Sikh message is universalised. Both perspectives, precisely because of their shared assumptions, fail to see the text's own 'hermeneutic' claims. Rather than seek an external methodology, either validated by science or justified by dogmatic faith, to understand the GGS, Gurū Nānak's own clues about how to interpret the Word in the text itself should be investigated and situated within its Indic context. This calls for a thorough analysis of the key terms, themes and traditions that inform the understandings of the GGS as a North Indian writing within the *nirguṇa-bhakti* tradition.